

Leaving the twentieth century health food store: Infinity Foods

**Once there was a
wave of community
food stores.
That was when...
and these days there
are supermarkets,
supermarkets and
out-of-town
supermarkets.**

**Yet, in places, community food ideals remain and work.
In Brighton for instance...**

Brighton on the South coast is a funky kind of place, with shoals of sub-cultures tussling for pieces of the action and quanta of the beached, bleached sunlight: New Age Channelling to New Age Travellers; Angelology to Chaology; Cyberpunk to Post-Modern HyperReality; Feminists; Deep Greens; Gays; and Hard-Wireds all function in this city by the sea. And in terms of presenting these sub-cultures to the rest of the universe much of it coalesces visibility-wise in the warren of shops and market culture around Kensington Gardens, slightly to the east of the town centre.

Nestled in a particular nook of this cosmos is Infinity Foods, a wholefoods co-operative store, which has been supplying healthy and organic nourishment to the community for twenty-eight years since it opened in 1970. And as sure as the human species is dependent on its food intake, these sub-cultures along with many other sections of the community, and the many other cultures that have gone the way of time, have been nourished by the long present proximity of Infinity.

In a way, Infinity Foods is both a survivor of the sixties and an indication of how stores can organise themselves in the future if there is the motivation and pragmatic idealism to do so. Part of the positive energy which brought about the setting up of wholefood, alternative, and other kinds of stores and shops in the early seventies, worked towards fairer deals for the staff and customer alike. Many of these have disappeared in the interim years but across the country a recognisable, if considerably thinned, network of these original symbols to hippy-commerce continues. They are no longer news, but rather are integrated and embedded in the communities where they initially took root. Infinity Foods is a good and representative example of that movement, through the skein of wholefoods. Today, after years and years of ideology and trading which appeared to do everything possible to discourage traditional forms of economic practice, and given a vastly

changed worldview, can it be imagined that such a widespread, broadscale movement towards holistic alternative trading could happen again? Or will set-ups in the future be relatively piecemeal and isolated?

On the windows of the current Infinity Foods is the logo writ circular 'For your health and for the Earth's health'. That's very much the crux of Infinity foods credo. As Graham Mayo, a long time member of the Co-operative says, "Really, the initial drive was to make whole foods available in 1970. In 1970 whole foods were not available. All the food was just beginning to get into people's consciousness. So initially 'whole-foods', but then gradually through the years 'organic' became a very major part of the philosophy."

"It was very much the product of the sixties generation. It was part of the holistic idea that food should be whole rather than machine processed, chemically stripped and interfered with. So it grew out of the idealism of the 1960s, to be a practical venture of the 1970s."

Infinity actually began life as a macrobiotic restaurant at the University of Sussex. The original idea was to provide whole food, vegetarian food and vegan food, the experimental diets which were at that time in the air. Called 'Biting Through' – incidentally the twenty-first hexagram of the I Ching also known as Shih Ho – it quite quickly became clear that "instead of creating a demand for the food they produced, there was a demand for the raw ingredients", and in the same year a ground floor of a terraced Brighton house was converted into the original 'Infinity Foods'.

When I ask to what degree the focus of providing a good range of whole foods/organic foods is part of a holistic world view, Graham says that it's certainly his view, but adds the dimension of the Co-operative, "It is in a way up to the individual. In a co-operative you cannot have a fixed ethic. It's unlikely in any business or in any individual, as times change. People change within the business, and the aim and ideal changes. It would be theoretically possible for Infinity, for people to change to something completely different. It's very unlikely, because you have a momentum held within the members of a commitment to environmental organic wholefood, but the ethos of the business is very much the sum total of all the members at any one time and there is a pervading ethos that seems to have carried through, and that's certainly been so in things like minimising additive and minimising processing, and maximising sale of organic".

"I think", he adds "that the ethos hasn't fundamentally changed in the deeper issues at all. On the shallower issues it has changed. We now stock goods with sugar. We now stock sugar. Ten years ago it was an absolute banned substance."